

1872 AVELING  
English Midwives

MRS ELIZABETH NHELL

THE name of Elizabeth Nihell is met with more frequently in the works of obstetrical writers than that of any other English midwife; not because she wrote upon or practised her art better than her professional sisters, but because of the fierce attack she made upon men-midwives and their instruments. She was evidently possessed with the fear that midwives were about to be entirely superseded by men, and in defence of her sex she came boldly to the front and unfurled the banner of defiance. With true instinct she recognised the strongest point of the men-midwives' position, and against that she directed her principal attack.

It was the midwifery forceps which dealt the irreparable blow to the prestige of midwives, and they were not long in discovering it. Boldly and

persistently they fought against their introduction and use. They knew that a surgical instrument must be controlled by the hand of a surgeon, as a sword must be wielded by a soldier, so they persistently denounced all "instrumentarians," and maintained that every requisite operation could be best performed by the hand alone. Public opinion was appealed to, and anxious mothers wavered which sex to employ. We all remember the arrangements which were made relating to the birth of Tristram Shandy. How his father was for having a man-midwife by all means and his mother by no means—how it was arranged that his mother was to have the old woman, and the operator was to have license to drink a bottle of wine with Mr Shandy and Uncle Toby in the back parlour, for which he was to be paid five guineas—how it was found necessary to call in Dr Slop (Dr Burton, of York), and the disfiguring effects his forceps had on the nose of Tristram. In spite, however, of the breaking of this historical nose the revolutionising forceps still continued their work, and men-midwives increased in number until the complaint was made that there were "more men-midwives than streets."

Mrs Nihell attributed the success of the "he-practicers," as she calls them, in a great measure to fashion. "I have myself known," she says, "women so infected by this silly vanity that on receiving visits from their friends after lying in, and being delivered by a woman, have been ashamed of having had the better sense and regard for themselves to employ a midwife in defiance of the fashion, and have told their friends that it is true Mrs — had lain them, but that there was a doctor at hand in the next room."

Mrs Nihell was born in London in 1723, and early in life adopted the profession of midwifery. She says, "I frequented the Hôtel Dieu two whole years before being received an apprentice-midwife, which I accomplished with great difficulty on account of being born a subject of England, and consequently a foreigner there; my admission, however, I gained at length through the favor, protection, and special recommendation of His Royal Highness the Duke of Orleans." Her husband was a surgeon-apothecary, and he and she practised their professions in the Haymarket. As might be expected, it was not long before Mrs Nihell, the leader of

midwives, entered into combat with Smellie, the head of the men-midwives. The number of male pupils he instructed made her very irate, and at length she gave full vent to her feelings by writing a book with the following title:—‘A Treatise on the Art of Midwifery, setting forth various abuses therein, especially as to the practice with instruments, the whole serving to put all rational inquirers in a fair way of very safely forming their own judgment upon the question which is it best to employ, in cases of pregnancy and lying-in, a man-midwife or a midwife.’ London, 1760, pp. 471.\*

The state of mind in which she enters upon her work is thus described in her preface:—“My very natural and strong attachment to the profession, which I have long exercised and actually do exercise, created in me an insuppressible indignation at the errors and pernicious innovations introduced into it, and every day gaining ground, under the protection of Fashion, sillily fostering a preference of men to women in the practice of midwifery; a preference first admitted by credulous Fear, and admitted without examination, upon this so suspicious recommendation

\* “Said to have been written by her husband.”—Merriman.

of those interested to make that Fear subservient to their selfish ends." Her book is divided into two parts, which she epitomises thus :—" The first treats of our title to the practice of this art, of the pleas used by the men for arrogating to themselves the preference, and whether the superior safety is on the side of employing men-practitioners. The second has more particularly for object to demonstrate the insufficiency, danger, and actual destructiveness of instruments in the art of midwifery." As she proceeds she abandons herself to the freest expression of her feelings, applies to men-midwives all sorts of opprobrious names, and ridicules, often doubtless with justice, " that multitude of disciples of Dr Smellie, trained up at the feet of his artificial doll, or, in short, those self-constituted men-midwives made out of broken barbers, tailors, or even pork butchers, for I know myself one of this last trade, who, after passing half his life in stuffing sausages, is turned an intrepid physician and man-midwife. See the whole pack open in full cry: to arms! to arms! is the word; and what are those arms by which they maintain themselves, but those instruments, those weapons of death! Would not one imagine that the art

of midwifery was an art military?" Yes, those "murderous instruments," those cold, hard, inflexible instruments were even more objectionable to Mrs Nihell than the men-midwives themselves, for did she not know and say, "In truth, the faculty of using those instruments is the sole tenure of their usurped office." She did not confine herself, however, to the abuse of instruments. Smellie was honoured by a large share of her attention. He had endeavoured to soften the prejudice against men-midwives by a well-intentioned but injudicious proposal that they should adopt an effeminate but, what he called, a "commodious dress, namely, a loose washing nightgown, which he may have in readiness to put on when he is going to deliver; his waistcoat ought to be without sleeves, so that his arms may have more freedom to slide up and down under cover of the wrapper; and the sleeves of his shirt may be rolled up and pinned to the breasts of his waistcoat. Where he is obliged to alter his position a sheet ought to be tucked round him or an apron put on." Smellie unfortunately also had a very large hand,\* and

\* Dr W. Douglas describes Smellie as "a raw-boned, large-handed man, fit only to hold horses or stretch boots in Cranburne Alley."

Mrs Nihell, speaking of these two subjects, hands and dress, satirically alludes to "the delicate fist of a great-horse-godmother of a he-midwife, however softened his figure might be by his pocket nightgown being of flowered calico, or his cap of office tied with pink and silver ribbon. I would advise for the younger ones a round-ear cap, with pink and silver bridles." All this proves with what hostility the contest was being carried on; some would have annihilated the whole race of midwives, and others would have completely crushed the accoucheurs. Accoucheurs forsooth! said the midwives, a fine new-fangled title, first used by the French man-midwife Clement after he had delivered La Valière, who, every one knows, was no better than she should have been. The fight continued fierce and furious, and there appeared no signs of peace. The contest, however, undignified as it was, had the effect of interesting the public, and concentrating their attention upon a subject which had been too long neglected. A practical indication of this interest is to be found in the fact that about the same time five of the most important lying-in hospitals in London were established—The British Lying-in Hospital, 1749; the City of London Lying-in

Hospital, 1750 ; Queen Charlotte's, 1752 ; Royal Maternity, 1757 ; and the General Lying-in Hospital, 1765.

In 1772 Mrs Nihell was still in practice in the Haymarket, as appears from some letters\* which were published that year against man-midwives. They were signed "Man-midwife," and were probably written by her husband, or by some interested friend, for in them her book is eulogised, and her name brought forward as that of a most accomplished midwife. They also contained an indecent attack on Dr William Hunter, with whom she had quarrelled. He having been called in to assist her, found the umbilical cord separated from the placenta, and did not readily accept her explanation that the accident had been caused by the nurse in removing soiled linen from the patient.† These letters produced an angry answer from "Old Chiron," who asserted that "Midwives cram their patients with cordials, keeping them intoxicated during the time they

\* 'The Danger and Immodesty,' &c. London, 8vo, 1772.

† Siebold, in his obstetrical letters, mentions a case in which a midwife had torn the cord from the placenta and had replaced it in the vagina. On taking hold of it without any traction he found it resting in his hand, when the midwife exclaimed, "My God! doctor, you have broken the cord."



are in labour, driving poor women up and down stairs, notwithstanding their shrieks, and shaking them so violently as often to bring on convulsion fits on pretence of hastening their labours, laughing at their cries, and breaking wretched jests upon the contortions of the women, whose torments would make a feeling man shudder at the sight."

Mrs. Nihell was, at this date, about fifty years of age; when she died and what family she left is not known, but that she had children we learn from her own statement, "I am myself a mother."